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ABSTRACT

Introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) into all English schools means that even teachers in small schools with mixed-age classes undertake a large amount of whole-class literacy teaching. The NLS promotes the use of specific teaching strategies during a carefully structured hour-long literacy session. Also, the framework of objectives for particular grades means that any whole-class work undertaken with a mixed-age class is, according to this framework, being delivered at a level inappropriate to some students. Since small elementary schools (having 100 or fewer students) are still a significant percentage of all schools in England and Wales, a study was conducted to determine how small schools are coping with the literacy hour. Twenty classrooms in small schools were observed over an 8-month period, and about 400 students were given standardized reading and writing tests at the beginning and end of the period. The teachers did not find the NLS as hard to implement as they had expected, although more difficulties were encountered in classes with more age groups. However, student progress on standardized tests did not differ by the number of age groups in the class, class size, or age position in the mixed-age class. Overall, the students made progress in literacy during the year; more progress was made in reading than writing; and classes with lower scores at the beginning of the year made the most progress. Teaching strategies used in the more successful classrooms are described, and specific suggestions are offered for implementing NLS in mixed-age classes. (SV)

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# THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LITERACY HOUR IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

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***Ros Fisher, Maureen Lewis and Bernie Davis** present data from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded research project into the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in small rural schools. Test results and observational data from teachers and children show that children on average made more progress than expected in some of the 20 classes in the study. Detailed analysis of the data has identified possible characteristics of successful teachers in the Literacy Hour. It is suggested that the Literacy Hour has been adopted in different ways by different teachers and this had an impact on the progress children made.*

## BACKGROUND

The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) into all schools means that even teachers in small schools with mixed-age classes undertake a large amount of whole-class literacy teaching. Also, the framework of teaching objectives is divided into objectives for particular year groups. This means that any whole-class work undertaken with a mixed-age class is, according to this framework, being delivered at a level inappropriate to some of the class members. Although the number of small primary schools in England and Wales – that is, those with 100 or fewer pupils – is decreasing, they still form a significant number of all schools. We therefore set out to investigate how these particular schools have coped with the introduction of a Literacy Hour and any distinctive problems that arose.

Classes with more than one year group are used from choice in some primary schools but are a necessity in the small primary school. Previous research has emphasised the positive features of such schools but stressed the importance of flexibility of approach. Hopkins and Ellis (1) and Vulliamy and Webb (2) report that teachers need to be very flexible in their teaching in vertically grouped classes. These views are further reinforced by Harber (3) who, again, identifies flexibility as an important factor in successful teaching and learning in small schools: 'Teachers need to ensure their teaching methods are appropriate and relevant' (p. 21). Researchers and commentators on small schools appear united in the belief that for mixed-age classes to be effective, teachers have to be flexible in their approach to classroom organisation. However, the introduction of the Literacy Hour may limit the amount of flexibility available to teachers in small schools.

By advising one particular organisational structure of whole-class and group teaching and in having a clearly defined programme of study, the NLS appears to be removing the flexibility to choose methods. This research project was set up to examine how teachers in small schools implemented the Literacy Hour, how successful they were, what problems they encountered and how they overcame these. However, many of the issues that arose during our year-long observation were not unique to small schools and so have implications for the wider school community.

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## METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

Ten schools were chosen in consultation with the LEA as having neither exceptionally high nor exceptionally low standards of attainment in literacy. One key stage 1 and one key stage 2 teacher was observed in each school.

In order to examine what was happening in these classrooms we collected a range of evidence:

- teachers' responses to a *Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy Questionnaire* (TBALQ) (4), which gives some indication of teachers' attitudes to literacy teaching;
- interviews with class teachers to find out about their teaching before the introduction of the NLS and teachers' attitudes to it. At the end of the year, teachers were again questioned as to their opinions of the NLS and how they had found it to work in their class;
- classroom observation of teachers using a structured observation schedule;
- field notes completed by the researcher after each visit;
- collection of teachers' planning documents;
- evidence of pupils' progress in reading from standardised testing;
- tracking of targeted children within each classroom using structured observation schedule (one child for each year group with standardised test score nearest to 100);
- collection of work samples from targeted children.

The data were collected by a research assistant, working full time on the project. She visited each classroom once a month for eight months between November 1998 and June 1999.

## FINDINGS

The intention was to observe a full Literacy Hour in both classes on each visit. In reality, the extent to which the NLS format was followed varied from class to class. It would be more accurate to say that an hour of literacy was observed each time – not necessarily a Literacy Hour. Although the whole-class sessions were largely adhered to, less than half the observations included guided reading or writing. There was, however, more guided reading than guided writing. The 20-minute slot in which the children are expected to be working independently, on many occasions, resembled previous practice of the teacher moving from group to group supervising children's work. Table 1 shows the extent to which different parts of the hour were established.

**Table 1. Observed use of the Literacy Hour in the research classrooms**

| Key stage | Total no. of observations | No. of whole-text sessions observed | No. of word/sentence sessions observed | No. of guided sessions observed R | W | No. of independent sessions observed | No. of plenary sessions observed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 80* | 78 | 71 | 45 | 34 | 79 | 73 |
| 2 | 78 | 78 | 70 | 25 | 15 | 78 | 72 |

* In 80 observed sessions at key stage 1,160 guided sessions could have been observed as KS1 teachers are expected to take two guided groups in the 20-minute slot; 13 such 'double sessions' were observed in the 80 observations.

### Mixed-age teaching

These teachers did not find the literacy strategy as hard to implement as they had expected. They found children enjoyed the wide range of books read in shared text sessions and that children's critical vocabulary increased. They found also that children became more focused and responded well to the routines.

Teachers with two year groups in a class found the mixed ages not to be a problem. On the other hand, those with three or four year groups still found difficulty in planning and choosing texts to suit such a broad range of ability. However, we found from our research that there was no significant difference in the progress according to the test scores made by children in classes with two, three or four year groups. Nor was there any difference between progress made by the youngest year group in a two, three or four year group class, nor among progress of the oldest year group in a mixed-age class. In fact, although there was concern about the younger children being left behind, we have some encouraging examples of children experimenting with aspects of literacy that the older children had been working on.

### Children's progress in reading

Progress from October to June was computed by calculating the difference between the initial and final standardised scores on the literacy tests. The overall difference between average initial standardised score and average final standardised score was 1.009. Although there was only a very slight overall increase over the eight-month period, given that all except the reception children had a more advanced version of their test, these results can be seen as positive.

However, more interesting is the distribution of the scores within each of the classes. Although overall the average score had increased very slightly, there was a large variation between classes with only a few children showing any gain and other classes where most children had made gains.

Computer analysis was used to examine the effect of ability, as indicated by the October score, on the change in standardised score. This shows that children who had low scores in October made more progress over the eight months; and children who had higher scores in the October tests made less progress. However, analysis of the test scores showed no significant difference between children in classes of different size (some small schools have very low class sizes) and number of year groups in the class, nor the age position of the year group in a mixed-age class. Thus it was found to be only the teacher or score at point of entry that had any significant effect on progress in reading test performance. Nevertheless, it must be noted that, although 400 children were tested, the number of children in each of the groupings was relatively small. Therefore these findings should be considered only as indicative.

### Progress in writing

One of the key features of the NLS is the clear focus given to the development of writing alongside reading. We collected writing samples from the target children in each month of the period of observation. These work samples reveal interesting information both about the kind of writing experience in each of the classes and how children progressed.

Celia was five and a half years old in November 1998. She was a confident writer at the start of the year but had problems with sound/symbol correspondence, separation of words and knowledge of sentence structure. At the beginning of October, following a reading of 'The Bear who Couldn't Sleep', she wrote:

ThisisbulgjTtblk
tokgjnt got
to bed nlj
ana
nljkn
blgnlj
kljtn.

Over the eight months between tests, Celia's reading score decreased by nine points, but her writing showed good development. She wrote narrative, Christmas greetings, a non-chronological report, a recount and a rhyming poem. The amount she wrote increased during the year and her use of mainly phonetic spelling developed. She learned to write in sentences and use full stops. She used mostly simple sentences, but sometimes joined them with 'and', 'so', 'then' or 'when'. Her vocabulary was simple, but she had begun to include adjectives for detail. In June, based on the story of 'The Ugly Duckling', she wrote:

It was a sun day in the woods. Sue [So] a egg rolld down fomr a hll. crak! went the egg and it craked opn. Hello seid a foy [voice] How do you seid th cat. The fury creech [creature] look at him The creech was blak and fre [fierce]. It was los it look at him It foled [followed] him.

Rachel was nine years old at the start of the year in a class with three year groups. In September, she retold the following story:

It was a cold and frosty night. Then there was a frezing flake of snow and it put the fire out and the chief wanted to change the story but ... and the Bear's decided they were bored of story's so they decied to play chase so they rounded up brigand's and they went right on the montin.

By June, Rachel's test score on the *Progress in English* (PIE) test 10 showed an increase in standardised score of 12 points. Her knowledge of vowel digraphs had improved and she made good phonetic attempts at unknown words, for example, *pittafull, appertite*. However, she still had not learned to form plurals. By the end of the year, she had begun to use commas. Her use of vocabulary was imaginative and interesting, although she already used complex sentences (main and subordinate clauses); this use developed over the year and she used more clauses within sentences. During the year, she had a range of writing experience, mostly fiction – e.g. a diary from a character from the class novel, a planning sheet, narrative incidents. The teacher made effective use of writing frames in shared and independent writing sessions. At the end of June, she wrote a letter in response to a fictional complaint following a class trip (at the time of writing, she thought the complaint was real):

Dear Mr J McIntosh,
In your letter you say that Mr Morris tripped over string and has a bleeding knee, Mr Morris also complains that the string was put there on purpose and that there were lot's of children running around with bits of cloth, also we had no adults. But I think you're just plain boring because you did'nt see us playing Games with the cloth and string.

The main reason is that we were on an outing. One reason is that when our school goes on a day trip they are allowed to have fun as well as learning. A Further reson is if you are thinking of reporting us to the police then you can't because we are children!

Furthermore some people and children do shout because they are enjoying themself's. Ther for, altough some people think children should stay at school to learn we are still learning outside of school. I think that I have shown that some people do'nt think children should not have fun. But I think we should.
Yours sinserly
Rachel Jones

Don, a five-year-old at the start of the project, was in a class whose pupils made good overall progress in reading. However, his writing experience did not match up to the expectations of the Literacy Hour. First, his teacher did not let him write independently – he was always given the spelling of words he did not know. Thus it is difficult to judge how his spelling has improved from the writing samples. In September, with the help of a classroom assistant, he wrote:

At the weekend I wet to buy A new carpet it was gold and blue.

Secondly, in contrast to the variety of writing experience in some other classes, Don's teacher decided to retain the previous practice of children writing their news each Monday morning. He also wrote two stories. Although his reading score increased significantly by 12 points, his writing showed far less development. He increased the length of what he wrote but continued to use mainly simple or compound sentences joined by 'and' and 'then'. As the demands made on his written expression were very similar, his writing tended to follow the pattern of his first piece. His vocabulary was unadventurous, although by the end of the year he had begun to use adjectives to add interest to his writing, and he had learned to use full stops. At the end of June, he wrote a story about a 'Secret Garden', with the support of the teacher in providing spellings:

> Once upon a time there was a secret house I went in the house and I found the rusty key I opened the creaky door. There was a beautiful Garden. It had a fountain and a pond and I saw bluebells.

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## CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHING

The 20 teachers in our study represented a range of different teaching styles and beliefs at the beginning of the year and had varying attitudes towards the Literacy Hour. In general, there appeared to be little relationship between any particular set of existing beliefs and practices and pupil progress. However, the teachers who expressed the most negative views about the Hour, at the beginning of the year, were those teachers whose practice showed least change.

Similarities in teaching were observable across the sample. Teaching in the more successful classrooms was characterised by:

- **the use of a wide range of texts;**
- **the use of challenging texts;**
- **the use of open-ended and challenging questioning;**
- **a good relationship between the class and the teacher;**
- **planning and teaching to objectives;**
- **a purposeful and contextualised use of metalanguage (e.g. 'comma', 'adjective') by both teacher and pupils;**
- **an awareness of pace;**
- **the establishment of regular routines and well-rehearsed organisational strategies;**
- **explicit teaching. For example, in the classes where the children made good progress in writing, the teachers provided modelled and guided writing activities. They went beyond merely providing opportunities to write. They provided a series of scaffolded activities at all stages of the writing process – e.g. brainstorming and planning were both modelled in shared work and supported by various written aids in independent and guided work.**

Many of the characteristics listed above are not peculiar to the Literacy Hour, but we would tentatively suggest that the range of texts used; the increased use of metalanguage; the increased awareness of the pace of the lesson as the year progressed; and the explicit nature of some of the teaching, can be attributed to the impact of the NLS.

### Teaching to objectives

The characteristics listed above were not found in all the classrooms. Teaching to objectives, for example, would appear (on paper) to be well established as all the teachers had objectives listed on their plans. During the observations, however, some teachers typically taught to these objectives with occasional alterations, while other teachers' lessons did not appear to relate at all to what was planned. Changing objectives while the lesson is under way can be done for valid reasons. Appearing to teach random objectives that bear no relation to what is planned, over several observations, implies that such teachers are making token gestures towards the NLS requirements, but do not really understand or believe that teaching to objectives is useful.

On less than ten occasions in the 159 observations were objectives heard actually being made explicit to the children. On these few occasions, it was done by the teachers of classes that made the most progress. However, all the teachers in the classes where the children made progress taught in a focused way, and it was clear to the observer that they had their objectives clearly in view. They also typically asked questions related to the objectives during the plenary.

### Use of metalanguage (language to talk about language)

The use of metalanguage increased in all classrooms during the year, but it was used more successfully in those classrooms where the teachers already had a secure subject knowledge in English (as demonstrated in their pre-NLS interviews), or acknowledged their need to update their knowledge. In successful classrooms, children were using metalanguage unselfconsciously and accurately. For example, the observer noted that:

> *'The teacher asks the children to identify differences between the writing of Ted Hughes and R. L. Stevenson. Whilst this reading/discussion is going on the teacher uses the opportunity to refer to verbs, direct speech and adjectives. The children are responsive and seem interested... Children and teacher seem at ease with the level of metalanguage.'*

In other classrooms there was also an increase in the use of metalanguage but the children did not always appear to understand it:

> *'The ones working on synonyms and antonyms are still having problems with the terms.'*

### Routines

In those classrooms where the Literacy Hour became most fully established, accepted routines also became established or developed further. In these classes, the purpose of the routines was stressed to the pupils and they were given strategies to help them help themselves. For example, in one class there were charts on the wall, reminding the children of the actions to take if they were stuck with a word, or what to do if they had finished a task. In another, the teacher began the independent working slot by orally reminding children of five things to do before asking the teacher. However, in other classrooms teachers continued to respond to children's random interruptions and queries during the independent slot, and in these classrooms the guided work was either never started or was abandoned after a few weeks. Of the 20 classes observed, six key stage 1 classrooms and five key stage 2 classrooms established routines successfully enough to undertake guided work during the majority of the observed sessions.

## DISCUSSION

### *Mixed-age teaching*

It does seem from the results of this albeit small study that the NLS can be successful in small schools with mixed-age classes. Most of the difficulties that these teachers encountered are ones that are not limited to the NLS. There have always been problems in selecting texts and managing group work where there is a wide range of ability. The guided group work was found to be the most difficult to implement, but this difficulty does not seem to be limited to mixed-age classes. Where guided reading and writing was used well, children have made good progress.

Teachers emphasised that it is the nature of mixed-age classes in small schools that they vary from year to year. Thus strategies that work in one year may not be so effective the next. Overall, teachers stressed the importance of having high expectations of the whole class. When asked for advice to pass on to other teachers in small schools, they suggested:

- **Whole-class teaching**

  Keep objectives focused – do not try to cover every year group.

  Targeted and focused questioning is important.

  Use a variety of texts to ensure covering all abilities and interests, both challenging and simple, with appropriate support/extension – do not just teach to the middle band.

  Children in younger groups enjoy trying out things they have seen older groups do.

- **Independent work**

  It is important to develop independent working in order to ensure appropriate task demand.

  Flexible grouping using pairs and cooperative work helps.

  It is important for reception children to have opportunity for play-based activities.

### *Progress in literacy*

Results from this study have shown children making progress in literacy over the first year of implementation of the NLS. It has been interesting to note that there was not always a match between progress as indicated by reading test scores and progress in writing. Results from the reading tests showed those classes whose scores were lower at the start of the year making the most progress. This is encouraging for the Government, whose target is to raise standards so that 80 per cent of 11-year-olds will attain level 4 by 2002. However, 1999 National Curriculum assessment results show that less progress has been made in writing than in reading. This is borne out by our study which shows some classes making considerably more progress in writing than others. In particular, where teachers made full use of shared and guided sessions to model and scaffold children's writing development, children's writing showed good progress.

## IMPLICATIONS

This study supports the findings from evaluations of the National Literacy Project undertaken by NFER (5) and OFSTED (6), that the NLS can be effective in raising standards of literacy. However, the greater insight into what actually happens in classrooms provided by the qualitative data discussed here shows that success is not guaranteed. Teachers still need support in the development of the literacy strategy. Where there is a reluctance to abandon previous practice that goes against NLS procedures, such as the teacher taking a more supervisory role, or where only limited experience of different text types is offered, progress is less likely. Also where expectations of both attainment and independence are low, the Literacy Hour becomes merely mechanistic and, consequently, less successful.

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